

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY  
ACQUISITIONS**

**Agenda Item XXXI.**

**June 25, 2001**

**COASTAL CONSERVANCY**

Project Summary  
June 25, 2001

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY  
ACQUISITIONS**

File No. 00-105  
Project Manager: Peter S. Brand

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,300,000 to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition of the Peto, Hanson, Gould, Villanueva, Afalao, Reider, McConica, Limoneira, Lloyd-Butler, and Valley Crest properties, totaling approximately 1,600 acres, to further implementation of the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan.

**LOCATION:** The Santa Clara River, Ventura County (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

**ESTIMATED COST:** Coastal Conservancy                      \$1,300,000 \*

\* Source: Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project  
(General Fund); 2000 Water Bond – River Protection Program (Proposition 13)

**PROJECT SUMMARY:** Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$1,300,000 to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition of the Peto, Hanson, Gould, Villanueva, Afalao, Reider McConica, Limoneira, Lloyd-Butler, and Valley Crest properties, totalling approximately 1,600 acres. These acquisitions will preserve two miles of river and riparian habitat and allow for the restoration of approximately 700 acres of associated upland habitat and coastal sage scrub. The acquisitions will continue the implementation of the Lower Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan, approved by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000. The River Parkway Plan recommends acquisition of a continuous estuarine and riverine corridor along the lower 15 miles of the Santa Clara River to preserve habitat and to provide public trail linkages along the river and adjacent public lands. All of the landowners have ex-

pressed interest in selling their river property. Land values are estimates based on comparable sales. Appraisals and negotiations will determine the ultimate price. A grant to The Nature Conservancy will assist in expediting acquisition of the property and in meeting the ecological goals established by Nature Conservancy scientists for coastal sage scrub and riparian habitat in the Santa Clara River watershed region.

This project is the third in a series of proposed acquisitions leading to the creation of a 15-mile-long park and wildlife preserve encompassing 6,400 acres and extending from the ocean to South Mountain. The Coastal Conservancy, working with river landowners and its local partners, has developed the acquisition and management concept of a Santa Clara River Parkway, an unprecedented opportunity for river restoration in southern California.

The proposed acquisition is also consistent with the consensus recommendations of the recently completed five-year planning effort of the Santa Clara River Enhancement and Management Plan (SCREMP), which included representatives of all of the interest groups on the river. The Plan encourages the purchase of property from willing sellers for the preservation of existing resources and the restoration of degraded habitat. Nine properties are considered likely prospects for acquisition this fiscal year, using the Proposition 13 River Parkway fund, provided in the Conservancy's 2000/01 budget.

The project has been presented to several community interest groups and has been endorsed by the City of Oxnard and City of Ventura Liaison Committee. The Coastal Conservancy has been asked by the Cities of Ventura and Oxnard and a coalition of river property owners to take the lead on acquisition and in the formation of a Joint Powers Authority for ultimate management of the public lands.

The Santa Clara River Parkway has two complementary purposes: the acquisition and public management of the river corridor to allow for habitat restoration, flood management, public enjoyment, and environmental education; and the restoration of the natural processes of the river to prevent continued flood losses of habitat, farmland, and public facilities.

**COASTAL CONSERVANCY**

Staff Recommendation

June 25, 2001

**SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY**

**ACQUISITIONS**

File No. 00-105

Project Manager: Peter S. Brand

**STAFF**

**RECOMMENDATION:** Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Sections 31251 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million three hundred thousand dollars (\$1,300,000) to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition Peto, Hanson, Gould, Villanueva, Afalao, Reider, McConica, Limoneira, Lloyd-Butler, and Valley Crest properties on the Santa Clara River (Ventura County Assessor Parcel Numbers 107-0-011-185 & 195; 099-0-070-095, 090-0-190-245, 099-0-110-085; 107-0-120-040, 050, 080; 046-0-150-340, 046-0-160-240; 046-0-160-390; 107-0-010-830; 099-0-090-090; 107-0-120-010 & 030; 090-0-180-070 & 080; 090-0-190-470 & 430, 090-0-010-200 within the Santa Clara River Parkway project area as shown in Exhibit 1 of the accompanying staff recommendation), subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to any disbursement of funds under this authorization, the Executive Officer shall review and approve an acquisition work program which shall guide the efforts of the grantee in negotiating and acquiring properties;
2. Funds shall be disbursed in accordance with the approved work program for each acquisition, the Executive Officer shall review and approve all title and acquisition documents including but not limited to the appraisal, agreement of purchase and sale, escrow instructions and documents of title pertaining to that acquisition;

3. The Nature Conservancy shall pay no more than fair market value for any property acquired pursuant to this authorization, as established by an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer; and
4. All property interest acquired with these funds shall be permanently protected for public access, open space and habitat conservation in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer and consistent with the Enhancement Plan and Public Resources Code Section 31116(b)."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with and will help to carry out the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan approved by the Conservancy on October 26, 2000, pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31241-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources;
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines; and
3. The Nature Conservancy is a private, nonprofit organization existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code, and having among its principal charitable purposes the preservation of land for scientific, historic, educational, recreational, agricultural, scenic or open space opportunities."

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**STAFF DISCUSSION:**

**Project Description:** Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$1,300,000 to The Nature Conservancy for the acquisition of the Peto, Hanson, Gould, Villanueva, Afalao, Reider McConica, Limoneira, Lloyd-Butler, and Valley Crest properties, totaling approximately 1,600 acres. Acquisition will preserve two miles of river and riparian habitat and allow for the restoration of approximately 700 acres of associated upland habitat and coastal sage scrub. The acquisitions would be the third step in implementation of the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan, which recommends acquisition of a continuous estuarine and riverine corridor along the Santa

Clara River in Ventura County for habitat preservation and to provide public trail linkages to and along the river and adjacent public lands. All of the landowners have expressed interest in selling. Land values are estimates based on comparable sales. Appraisals and negotiations will determine the ultimate price. A grant to The Nature Conservancy will assist in expediting acquisition of the property and in meeting the ecological goals established by Nature Conservancy scientists for coastal sage scrub and riparian habitat in the Santa Clara River watershed region. The Santa Clara River Valley is one of four core areas that are the focus of the Nature Conservancy's new L.A.–Ventura Project.

Future planning for the properties will consider various measures to enhance existing habitat that is used by many threatened coastal species and to restore riparian wetlands that have been converted to agriculture. Also, the reconnection of the river with its floodplain will reduce flooding and non-point source pollution that have damaged resources downstream critical to the ecological health of the coast. The Conservancy is hiring biologists and hydrogeomorphologists to assist in the development of a strategic plan integrating restoration plans for different reaches of the river that can be implemented in coordination with the acquisition program.

Once whole reaches of the river have been acquired, private levees can be removed, obviating the pressure for pilot channels, resolving longstanding regulatory battles, and reducing most of the future costs of flood damage to farms and public facilities. Reestablishment of riparian areas will also stabilize banks, slow flood flows, and reduce erosion. A continuous river hiking trail connecting adjoining parks to the preserve will provide environmental education opportunities in close proximity to the schools of Ventura, Oxnard, and Santa Paula.

The project is consistent with the consensus recommendations of the recently completed, five-year planning effort of the Santa Clara River Enhancement and Management Plan (SCREMP) which included representatives of all of the interest groups on the river. The Plan encourages the purchase of property from willing sellers for the preservation of existing resources and the restoration of degraded habitat.

The Coastal Conservancy has been asked by the Cities of Ventura and Oxnard and a coalition of river property owners to take the lead on acquisition and the formation of a Joint Powers Authority for ultimate management of the public lands. A grant

to The Nature Conservancy will expedite transfer of ownership and provide interim management while a joint powers authority is being formed and specific restoration plans developed for these properties and others acquired along the river corridor.

Project Financing: Coastal Conservancy \$1,300,000

Site Description: The natural vegetation of the project sites consists of a variety of habitat communities including Southern Willow Riparian Scrub, Coastal Sage Scrub and Cottonwood-Willow Riparian Forest. Several special-status species occur on these sites, or are known to occur nearby. For example, least Bell's vireo, a state and federally listed migratory songbird is reported to use riparian habitats onsite. The federally endangered southern steelhead trout uses the riverbed portion of the properties as a migration corridor. Santa Ana sucker, a small minnow-like fish, is expected to occur onsite, and the southwestern pond turtle likely inhabits the riparian sites.

The Santa Clara River is the largest river in southern California and one of the last major rivers in the region that exists in a relatively natural state. The Santa Clara originates in the northern slope of the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County, traverses Ventura County and flows into the Pacific Ocean halfway between the Cities of San Buenaventura and Oxnard. Its total length is approximately 100 miles with its watershed covering approximately 1,200 square miles.

The headwaters of the Santa Clara and all of its major tributaries originate on National Forest lands. The estuary at the river mouth is protected as a natural preserve within McGrath State Beach. The portion of the river in Los Angeles County is designated as a "significant ecological area" by Los Angeles County. While this designation does not convey protective status, it does recognize the biological importance of the upper Santa Clara River. The majority of the main river corridor is privately owned and not protected.

Elevations in the Santa Clara River watershed range from 8,831 feet above sea level on Mount San Piños to sea level at McGrath State Beach. Streamflows into the Santa Clara River are highly variable. Average discharge measured at Montalvo (three miles upstream of the estuary) ranges from no flow for many days during the summer to winter flood flows over 100,000 cubic feet per second (cfs). Major floods are common on the Santa Clara, and because the river carries high sediment

loads and has a broad migrating channel, flood damage has been extensive. The most damaging flood occurred in January 1969, when a peak flood of 160,000 cfs jumped the north bank of the river and destroyed the East Side Treatment Plant, Ventura Boat Harbor, and several upstream bridges.

From a biological perspective, the river is unmatched in southern California. Extensive patches of high quality riparian habitat are present along the entire length of the river. These patches serve as “stepping stones” for migratory birds traveling between riparian areas and wetlands on the south coast.

The river is also home to many species in decline throughout the southern California region. The federal listed endangered least Bell’s vireo and unarmored threespine stickleback are two such species. Projections in the draft recovery plan for the vireo indicates that approximately 4,500 acres of riparian habitat on the Santa Clara River could support 625 territorial male vireos, more than any other southern California river, making the Santa Clara the site for a new population stronghold. Likewise, two reaches of the river in Los Angeles County are designated as essential habitat for the stickleback. Without these areas, the sticklebacks, vireos, and the other endangered or candidate species (*e.g.*, least tern, tidewater goby, *etc.*) will face localized extinction and possible extirpation from the region.

The Santa Clara River is a highly dynamic system susceptible to episodic flood events, most recently in 1969, 1978, and 1995. Natural processes such as flooding and fire, and historic land use practices such as grazing, agriculture, urban development, and aggregate mining have influenced the geomorphic characteristics of the watershed. Use of the watershed has changed from grazing to agriculture and urban development in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties over the past two centuries. In the 1900s the trend of narrowing the river for agricultural land reclamation and increasing urban development up to the river banks have created a narrower river/riparian corridor with a greater potential for erosion damage. Local efforts at bank stabilization have required frequent maintenance and raised concerns that the methods used for channel stabilization at one location could be aggravating bank erosion at another location.

Project History: In August 1992 the Coastal Conservancy authorized the disbursement of \$200,000 as part of a \$710,000, 11-agency program to develop an enhancement and management plan for the Santa Clara River watershed. Nine main categories were identi-



fied to be the basis of the study: agriculture, aggregate extraction, biological resources, cultural resources, development, flood control, public access and recreation, transportation, and water supply. Additionally, protecting property rights and standardizing regulatory procedures were important sub-topics. The Management Plan Project Steering Committee has contracted for and produced ten reports on the history and resources of the river as well as a GIS mapping program for the river corridor.

The Conservancy has authorized disbursement of \$140,000 for the preparation of CEQA documentation and related environmental studies and analyses necessary to the completion of the Santa Clara River Enhancement and Management Plan. The Counties of Ventura and Los Angeles have committed \$100,000 to match the proposed Conservancy contribution.

The management plan resource reports and proposed recommendations now need to be analyzed for their potential environmental impacts and redrafted and synthesized into a final report. Further studies will be done to assess the feasibility of specific restoration measures that could be undertaken following adoption of the plan. The revised and refined enhancement plan, along with the CEQA documents will then be presented to the Conservancy and many of the participating agencies for their consideration and possible approval or adoption.

In 1996, the Conservancy in conjunction with its plan partners determined that demonstration projects were urgently needed to show the feasibility of streambank stabilization using biotechnical techniques. After studies of alternate sites and methods, Valley View Ranch near Santa Paula was selected. An enhancement plan was prepared and approved for reach five of the river, including this property. The Conservancy authorized phased acquisition of the ranch in 1997. The Conservancy, the owner, and Friends of the Santa Clara River continue to work together to complete permitting and acquisition documents required for the sale and transfer.

The Conservancy approved the Santa Clara River Conceptual Enhancement Plan and authorized acquisition of the 220-acre Camp property in October 2000. The Nature Conservancy, the Coastal Conservancy grantee, closed on the property in February 2001. On May 26, 2001, the Prairie Pacific property was approved for acquisition through a grant to the Nature Conservancy. That acquisition is expected to close in July 2001.

**PROJECT SUPPORT:** The Santa Clara River Enhancement and Management Plan has the support of Assemblyman Jack O'Connell, the City of Santa Clara, the City of Fillmore, the City of Santa Paula, the City of San Buenaventura, the Ventura County Resource Conservation District, the United Water Conservation District, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Caltrans, the Coastal Commission staff, the California Department of Fish and Game, the Angeles National Forest, the Los Padres National Forest, the Ventura County Farm Bureau, the sand and gravel industry, the State Parks Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, and the Audubon Society.

**CONSISTENCY WITH  
CONSERVANCY'S  
ENABLING LEGISLATION:** This project is undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code; in particular Chapter 6 (Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270).

Consistent with Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the enhancement of coastal resources that have suffered losses of natural and scenic values as a result of human actions. Grants under this chapter may be used for the assembly of parcels of land within coastal resource enhancement areas to improve resource management, for relocation of improperly located or designed improvements and for other corrective measures, all of which are contemplated by the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan. The grant of funds to the Nature Conservancy for acquisition of the Santa Clara River properties is consistent with Section 31251, which provides that the cost of acquiring lands within coastal resource enhancement areas may be funded through the Conservancy.

Pursuant to Section 31251.2, in order to enhance the natural character of coastal resources within the coastal zone, the Conservancy may undertake a project or award a grant to enhance a watershed resource partly outside the coastal zone. The Santa Clara River Parkway project will result in improved coastal resource management and will enhance the natural and scenic character of the river and its watershed. The Santa Clara River has suffered a loss of habitat values as a result of land use and flood control practices. Unless alternatives are developed that reduce these losses, habitat will continue to degrade.

Consistent with Section 31252, the tidal portion of the Santa Clara River is identified in the City of San Buenaventura's certified Local Coastal Program as needing public action to resolve existing and potential resource problems. The inland portions of the river also are identified in the Ventura County Certified Local Coastal Program, the Los Angeles County, City of Santa Clarita, City of Santa Paula, and City of Fillmore General Plans as a significant ecological resource in need of public action to resolve existing and potential resource problems. The Santa Clara River Parkway project would address existing and potential resource problems and craft long-term solutions for resolving these problems. Consistent with Section 31258, the Enhancement Plan will be forwarded to the Coastal Commission for review, because it involves areas both within the Commission's retained jurisdiction and areas in which two or more local governments have jurisdiction.

Consistent with Section 31253, the level of Conservancy funding for this project has been determined through consideration of the total amount of funding available for coastal resource projects, the relative urgency of the project, and other factors prescribed by the Conservancy, as detailed below.

CONSISTENCY WITH  
CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION  
CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

**Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** see above.

**Consistency with the purposes of the funding source:** The anticipated source of funds for this project is a General Fund appropriation for coastal resource enhancement purposes. A portion of the funds needed are expected to derive from funding appropriated to the Conservancy from the River Protection Subaccount of the Safe Drinking Water, Clean Water, Watershed Protection and Flood Protection Act of 2000 (Proposition 13) that is specifically designated for the Santa Clara River Parkway. The River Protection Program provides for acquisition and restoration of riparian habitat, riverine aquatic habitat, and other lands in close proximity to rivers and streams and for river and stream trail projects undertaken in accordance with

among other things the statutory provisions of Chapter 6 of Division 21, the Conservancy's enabling legislation.

**Support:** The project is supported by the federal and state resource agencies and local governments and resident representatives in the watershed.

**Location:** The project advances the objectives of planning for and restoring the natural resources of a coastal watershed. The project area is outside the coastal zone but will have direct beneficial impacts on the river's coastal resources.

**Need:** While acquisition was identified as an implementation strategy in the Santa Clara River Enhancement and Management Plan, the Coastal Conservancy is the only entity that has been able to secure the necessary funds.

**Urgency:** There are 28 species of special concern on the Santa Clara River. Much of the habitat along the river has either been converted to other uses or is degraded due to flooding and pollution. Agricultural lands along the river, among the most productive in the nation, are endangered by severe flooding that is increasing due to development. Newhall Land and Farming has recently received development approvals for approximately 6,000 acres of its 12,000-acre holdings in Los Angeles County. Newhall owns 15,000 acres in Ventura County downstream from its current development and is considering future development of these lands along the Santa Clara River.

#### **Additional Criteria**

**Greater-than-local-interest:** The Santa Clara River was selected by a federal task force as one of the top 11 rivers in the country for its American Heritage River designation.

**Resolution of more than one issue:** The enhancement plan will help resolve several issues including flood management, habitat loss, sedimentation, erosion, water quality impairments, recreation, and mining.

**Leverage:** Conservancy funding is expected to leverage five million dollars of oil spill settlement funds for allocation to the Santa Clara River Parkway project.

**Cooperation:** All of the federal and state resource agencies and local jurisdictions and landowner group representatives have participated in the planning process.

CONSISTENCY WITH

THE COASTAL ACT: The proposed project would be consistent with the following specific policies of the Coastal Act:

Public Resources Code Section 30231 states that the “biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms . . . shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored. . . .”

Public Resources Code Section 30240 states that “environmentally sensitive habitat areas shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas.”

The City of San Buenaventura, City of Oxnard, and the County of Ventura’s certified Local Coastal Programs identified the Santa Clara River as an environmentally sensitive resource that should be protected and restored.

COMPLIANCE

WITH CEQA: Acquisition of the properties pursuant to the Santa Clara River Parkway Conceptual Enhancement Plan and others would be categorically exempt from review of environmental impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act because the transfer of ownership or interest in land is for the purpose of preserving open space (14 California Code of Regulations Section 15325) and for wildlife conservation purposes (14 California Code of Regulations Section 15313). Staff will file a Notice of Exemption with regard to acquisition of these properties following Conservancy authorization.

